

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR news release

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MILLIONS OF DOLLARS IN FURS, JEWELRY, AND CURIOS

MADE FROM PROTECTED WILDLIFE TO BE DISPOSED OF:

AUDIT POINTS TO INADEQUATE STORAGE AND ACCOUNTING PROCEDURES

What do you do with 5,000 tortoiseshell guitar picks? Or 1200 pairs of shoes made from Nile crocodile? Or any of the other tens of thousands of wildlife products filling government warehouses across the country?

You don't just store and forget them, according to an Interior Department Inspector General's report that points out this material has been accumulated without regard to its ultimate disposal. The report also found that the Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service had extremely weak accounting and security procedures and that a large number of the items could not be accounted for at one of the storage facilities audited.

Secretary of the Interior James G. Watt said that "as part of immediate and effective steps to remedy the situation," his department would propose regulations this week allowing the sale, transfer and destruction of these items.

The Fish and Wildlife Service now owns more than \$5 millions worth of products made from protected species such as jaguar coats, crocodile handbags, tortoiseshell jewelry, elephant footstools and polar bear rugs. These items have become government property after being involved in violations of U.S. or foreign wildlife laws. Many were seized by U.S. Customs or Fish and Wildlife Service officials after being illegally imported in commercial shipments, smuggled, or purchased by unsuspecting tourists.

"Our reviews indicate that weaknesses in the property accountability system not only have resulted in these items being unaccounted for, but created the potential for fraud, abuse, and theft if these problems are not corrected," Interior Inspector General Mulberry said. He added however, that the audit covered only two (Baltimore and New York) of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service offices that are responsible for seizing property at ports of entry for the United States. The New York facility has more than 49,000 items in storage. More than 2400 items could not be located there. No missing items were reported at the Baltimore facility that was audited.

Secretary Watt said, "I commend the work done by the Inspector General's office. Now that these weaknesses have been brought to light, we are determined to correct them. We are very serious about our efforts to give the taxpayers the most efficient government we can provide." Watt pointed out that the Department had received authority to dispose of the property in 1978 but that no action had been taken by the previous Administration.

Auditors from the Inspector General's office, who recently examined storage of wildlife products at the two facilities, found that approximately \$122,000 of the \$2 million worth of wildlife products in storage at the Kennedy airport facility could not be located. Also, Fish and Wildlife Service officials stated that they reported to the FBI that they discovered 835 stored animal skins missing and presumed stolen from their facility at Kennedy Airport. Mulberry said that among the items unaccounted for were 1,683 reptilian watch straps, 54 pieces of hawksbill sea turtle (tortoiseshell) jewelry, 31 ivory rings, and \$24,000 worth of turtle and reptile shoes. The report also showed that not only were items listed in various records not evident in the New York warehouse, but 985 items in the warehouse, including 38 mink coats with an estimated value of \$76,000, could not be traced back to control records.

Watt said that Fish and Wildlife Service officials have cooperated in the audit and have already begun the process of tightening up record keeping and storage procedures.

Service officals said that many wildlife products have been destroyed because they were deteriorating, and others have been loaned to museums or used for training, identification and public display.

Under the proposed regulations, the Service would return live wildlife and plants to the wild wherever possible. Live wildlife and products would also be transferred for official use to other government or foreign agencies or loaned to qualified individuals for scientific, educational, or public display purposes. Some items would be sold. For a large proportion of the materials, however, such as the 1200 pairs of shoes made from endangered crocodiles, destruction might be the only option. All of the proposed disposal methods were specifically allowed for the agency under the Fish and Wildlife Improvement Act of 1978.

The proposal would forbid the Service from selling migratory birds, bald or golden eagles, and species listed on Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). Sale by the Service of wildlife or plants listed as endangered or threatened under the Endangered Species Act would be allowed for the few species that may be traded lawfully in interstate commerce, such as alligators.

The proposed regulations are scheduled to be published in the <u>Federal</u> <u>Register</u> on September 21, 1981. Public comments are invited and should be submitted to the Director (LE), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, P.O. Box 2806, Washington, D.C. 20005, by October 21, 1981.

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